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China's Perception of the Soviet Threat [redacted]

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Beijing views Soviet military power as the major long-term threat to Chinese security. It regards Soviet military power as the pillar of Soviet foreign policy and draws a direct correlation between what it perceives as the Soviets' growing political assertiveness in Asia and their expanding military strength. The Chinese see Soviet strategy in Asia as "offensive," with the goal of driving out the United States, controlling northeast Asia, and encircling China both politically and militarily. In that regard, they link together Soviet military aid to India, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the ongoing Soviet military buildup and modernization on China's northern border, the expansion of the Soviet Navy in the Pacific, and the Soviets' support of Vietnam and their expanding presence in Indochina.

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China plays down the likelihood of a Soviet attack any time soon. The Chinese, moreover, appear confident that their small, concealed missile force deters a preemptive nuclear attack by the Soviets who, we believe, cannot be certain of eliminating China's ability to retaliate and destroy major population centers in the Soviet Far East. The Chinese also believe that Soviet conventional forces currently available along the Sino-Soviet frontier are insufficient to mount successfully a major conventional attack against China and that Moscow would be reluctant to weaken its defenses opposite Europe or in volatile South Asia to reinforce the China front.

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The Chinese reiterate that their strategy of "people's warfare" would ensure that a Sino-Soviet conflict would be protracted--a situation the Soviets would want to avoid. The Chinese also cite the advantages that accrue to them as a result of their vast territory, large manpower resources, and determination to endure great hardships if a war with the Soviet Union develops.

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[redacted] the Soviet threat pervades virtually all of China's military development and force planning. We believe the threat helps give Chinese military leaders a high political stature and serves as an incentive to improve Chinese forces:

- The threat also has forced Beijing to maintain a large standing Army which represents a considerable burden on China's meager economic resources.
- The need to counter Soviet advantages, particularly those in armor and tactical air forces, heavily influences China's selection of new weapons for the services.
- The threat also has stimulated military modernization. The sophisticated equipment that the Soviets have massed on their side of the border contrasts sharply with the obsolescent Chinese hardware and adds to the demand from military leaders for newer and better weapons. [redacted]

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China is well aware of the steps the Soviets have taken over the past few years to improve their military posture along the Sino-Soviet frontier. Beijing clearly perceives an acceleration in the rate of improvement of Soviet military capabilities since the late 1970s and attributes this primarily to Soviet concerns about improved relations between China and Japan and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the United States. [redacted]

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China has reacted to the Soviets by renovating and improving its northern defenses. The program, which began in 1979, involves primarily the ground forces but, we believe, almost certainly will involve the air and air defense forces more extensively as more modern weapons become available. The buildup has proceeded at a steady, moderate pace within the framework of the existing military structure and in a defensive context. [redacted]

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Although China is not immune to Soviet military pressure, we believe Beijing would be willing to take certain risks, such as a "second lesson" for Vietnam, as challenges to Soviet expansion in Asia. The Chinese appear confident that their own strengths combined with what they see as constraints on a major Soviet attack give them some leeway to take tough stands, where necessary, on regional security issues. In that regard we expect China to continue material support of Afghan resistance forces and of anti-Vietnamese forces in Kampuchea and Laos, to maintain close military ties to Pakistan and North Korea, to use its border forces to apply pressure on Vietnam, and to build up its northern defenses. [redacted]

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In our view, Beijing's belief that the Soviet force expansion will continue and that Moscow is unlikely to concede to China's preconditions for improved relations will be major factors in nudging China into closer cooperation with the United States. China's oft-proclaimed concern about the Soviet threat and the recent warming trend in Beijing's attitude toward Washington indicate that its "independent" foreign policy does not obviate a preference for one superpower to another. [redacted]

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